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War Hero Nathan Hale Confessed Spy Role

Nathan Hale, the American Revolutionary War hero, was a confessed spy who made a "full and free confession" of his name, rank, and purpose when captured by the British.

If the Central Intelligence Agency has fully exonerated Francis Gary Powers, history has fully exonerated Hale and remembers his last defiant words as a ringing call to patriotism.

As he stood on the gallows, Hale's words were: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Contemporary accounts reveal that Hale, once he was caught with the spy goods of sketches and notes on his person, told of his mission and "his being employed by Mr. Washington." His full admission, the accounts also show, was viewed as an act of resolute patriotism and defiance once he was confronted with the evidence.

From the manuscripts of Gen. William Hull, a close friend of Hale, comes a vivid account of the agonizing decision behind the Revolutionary War officer's decision to spy—a delicate and dangerous business in peace as in war.

Hale was an officer in Knowlton's Rangers in 1775 when he volunteered to spy on British forces on Long Island. Hull recalls in his memoirs how he warned Hale that spying was a hateful busi-

ness. Hale answered him: "If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to perform that service are imperious."

Hale, then barely 21, was disguised as a Dutch schoolmaster. He passed into the British camp, made sketches and notes, and was captured while making his return on Sept. 21.

He was hanged the next morning without trial as a "spy from the Enemy (by his own full confession)," according to the British military order.

Lt. Frederick MacKenzie, like Hull, viewed Hale as a brave man for his actions after his capture. Hale, MacKenzie wrote in his diary, behaved with "great composure and resolution."

A biographer of Hale, Henry Phelps Johnston, writes that Hale's "own full confession" only went to prove his patriotic character. The British, Johnston writes, used the phrase "doubtless to present it not only as a clear but also as an aggravated case, illustrating the American method of warfare, in which spies confessed to their employment, and thus indirectly implicating Washington and Congress."

But, Johnson concludes, Hale came out of it as a brave opponent — "no explanation, no evasion, . . . no cowardly cry for pardon could come from him."